

[Sudie Holton]

"THE STORY OF SUDIE HOLTON"

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Sudie Holton came over to the house last Sunday morning to help the wife with a company dinner. It was very special company and we were anxious to have everything just right. We didn't know anything about Sudie except that she was a very neat, light-skinned, colored woman about 45, who lived in the respectable part of the Negro settlement nearby. She had been recommended as being a really good cook who would not take a regular job but was willing to work for a few hours or day at a time. We were soon to learn that Sudie could swing a wicked skillet. Her biscuits were delectable morsels of feather-lightness and her fricasseed chicken and gravy beggared description.

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Sudie's clothes were very plain but as clean as a new pin and her quiet efficiency as she presided in kitchen and dining room inspired complete confidence that the occasion would be a notable success.

Watching her, you could pretty well imagine what her home would be like, humble but shiningly clean, with books on a shelf or some kind of musical instrument, perhaps an old piano. As she went swiftly about her preparations in the kitchen we heard her singing in a really beautiful contralto voice.

One of the dinner guests that day was a flashy young chap with an overgrown superiority complex and disagreeable habit of spouting foreign words at all times. He was not highly educated and was not exactly proficient in his own native tongue but he had memorized a few foreign phrases which he used to confound some less [?] enlightened listener. We considered it the worst possible taste but had found no way to break him of this unfortunate habit.

True to form, the youngster began to show off to the other guests but they were not sufficiently impressed to please him. Then Sudie's neatly uniformed figure and quiet dignity seemed to challenge his attention. As she placed a plate before him our pseudo-linguist turned toward her and let loose one of his pet volleys of Spanish, then darted a sly wink at the rest of us.

Without an instant's hesitation the colored woman looked him in the eye and replied in Spanish. She not only replied to his memorized phrase but made some further remarks for which he had no answer. His mouth dropped open and he blushed a bright red. Sudie stood holding the plate of hot biscuits and waiting courteously for his reply. With a convulsive swallow and sheepish grin he handed her a line of school-boy French phrases. As casually as if it were all part of her day's work she fed him French until he choked. Even to our ignorant ears her tone and accent were far superior to his. Our smart guy had

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enough and just sat open-mouthed and goggle-eyed. The rest of us were tickled pink by the turn of events.

"Sudie," I cried, "Where did you learn to speak such excellent French and Spanish?"

"Oh, I studied modern languages several years at college," she answered composedly.

"My German is not so good, but I have taught both French and Spanish."

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"You've been to college?" I stammered. "You are a teacher?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Go on," I urged, "Tell us all about it and what you are doing in our kitchen."

"I studied Spanish at Bennett College and took my last year of French at Columbia. I also studied music there. Is it so surprising that a Negro woman has happened to get some education? I wanted something better for myself than my poor mother had. She was just somebody's Negro cook and I lived in a shanty 'on the lot' with her. She was contented enough with her fate but my father had been white and I was always restless and dissatisfied. Mammy sent me to school whenever it was possible and I saved every penny I could and worked my way through college, cooking, dishwashing, sweeping, hair-dressing, mending, anything I could get to do. I loved to study and lessons were easy."

"And you taught?"

"Yes, I taught French and Spanish in the colored high schools for three or four years, and I taught music for about the same length of time at a small Negro college in South Carolina. I was interested in Dramatics too and tried to develop some Negro folk-plays."

"Why did you give up teaching for this.....this cooking?"

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"Well, its the old story. In [?] I met John Holton. He was an educated man and a teacher. We were both ambitious for ourselves and our race but right after our marriage he went to France as a soldier of the A.E.F. He was wounded and gassed and when he reached home his health was totally wrecked. I gave up all other plans and settled down to nurse him and make a home for the family. We had 4 two daughters. The elder graduated from college two years ago and is teaching music in the same little college in South Carolina where I used to teach. The younger girl is now a Junior at Bennett. We didn't have much money saved and it was soon gone. I found that along with my white father's taste for music and books I had inherited my black mother's skill in cooking. I had taken a degree in Home Economics and I decided to make catering my profession. I could keep up my home and do that work too. As I became known I made pretty good money and enjoyed the contacts with educated people.

"Jack died eight years ago. I suppose I have lost most of the restless ambition I used to have and I am contented enough with my little cottage and my odd jobs - like this. However I encourage my girls to go on where their father and I left off."

Here Sudie realized that she had been the center of attention for sometime and she picked up the plate of cold biscuits. There was a wicked twinkle in her black eyes as she looked at the crest-fallen young would-be linguist and then dropped into a rich dialect.

"Bress yo' hearts, folkses, the biscuits am cold an' old Sudie done talked her fool head off. "Souuse me, suh. 'Scuse me, Ma'am, an' I'll fotch some hot ones."